

Every child
deserves
Bouncers

While it was Spike Lee who made sneakers inextricably bound up with pop culture in his 1989 film "Do the Right Thing", the emergence of sneakers as the footwear of the cool kids would already happen in the early 60's. The rubber basket shoes, Converse's All Stars and Bata's Super Bullets, became as legendary as the people who wore them.

The BATA shoe factory, established in 1894 by the Czech entrepreneur Tomas Bata, grew quickly to become the world's biggest shoe company. The severe division of the world after the second world war into first and second however, meant the division of the company as well. The Eastern branch was nationalised; The Western branch moved its headquarters to Toronto. While the first focused completely on the production of shoes for within the Soviet Union, the latter quickly reached towards new international markets, with two new factories being built per year at its height. One of these new factories, BATA 300, was built in 1962 in the newly independent nation of Congo.¹ The production of rubber tennis and basketball shoes in Kinshasa seems to suggest that the company wanted to open up a new consumer market for their products in Africa as well.

The Belgian contractor and family business Blaton-Aubert, who developed a ground-breaking prestressing system for concrete in the early 1940's with the Ghent based professor Gustave Magnel², was active since early 1950's in the Belgian Congo with the subsidiary company *Compagnie Congolais de Constructions* (CCC). With the end of Belgian reign in 1960 however, the Blatons had to find a way to reposition themselves on the newly independent Congolese market. The company actively searched for new opportunities, abroad but also within Congo (Smets, 2012, p.192). In 1962 they seized the opportunity and gave everything to win the important contract to build the new factory for the multinational shoe company. The experience with prestressed concrete they had gained in Belgium was used as the main argument in their promotional material (Brussel: aam, Fonds Blaton).

The development of the Blaton-Magnel prestressing system gave the company serious credibility as one of the founding fathers of the building technique. A pioneering application of prestressed concrete in a building was the factory for the *Union Cottonnière* (UCO) in Ghent built by Blaton³, followed by the experiments in Charleroi of the Blaton-engineer Jacques Robin.⁴ It is the same (Blaton in-house) engineer who would use his body of knowledge for the BATA 300 building in the wholly different context of Congo.

The case of the Bata 300-factory in Kinshasa allows us to reassess the architectural history of Congo by shifting our view from the obsession with style and form to a more inclusive perspective with attention for transnational flows of ideas, models and practices. By focusing mainly on the figure of the architect, architectural history research on 20th century building in Africa so far has indeed only touched upon a small part of the immense built production in the former Belgian colony and presented a rather narrow narrative on the topic. If in 1949 Pierre Wigny, the then Minister of colonies, declared that "*tout le congo est un chantier*", we need to broaden our gaze and include these other players in our narratives to gain a more complete and profound understanding of Congo's architectural history. Our approach of the case of the new Bata factory in Kinshasa, then is in tune with the emerging scholarship that views construction history not only as a way of bringing a more complex web of different actors to the fore (contractors, engineers, clients and construction workers), but also, in line with what the French architectural historian Antoine Picon already argued in 2006, to write an alternative cultural history of building in the Congo that goes beyond an exclusively as a history of technology. (Picon, 2006). If we are interested in investigating the transfer (and transformation) of modes of production in the realm of concrete technology in Congo's (post)colonial context, then we are also interested which African consumers Bata was targeting with their fancy new shoes.

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Buggin' Out You almost knocked me down, man. The word is "excuse me."

Clifton Ah, excuse me, I'm sorry.

Buggin' Out Not only did ya knock me down, you stepped on my brand-new white Air Jordan's I just bought, and that's all you can say is "excuse me"?

Clifton **What, are you serious?**

Buggin' Out Yeah, I'm serious, I'll fuck you up quick two times. Who told you to step on my sneakers, who told you to walk on my side of the block, who told you to be in my neighborhood?

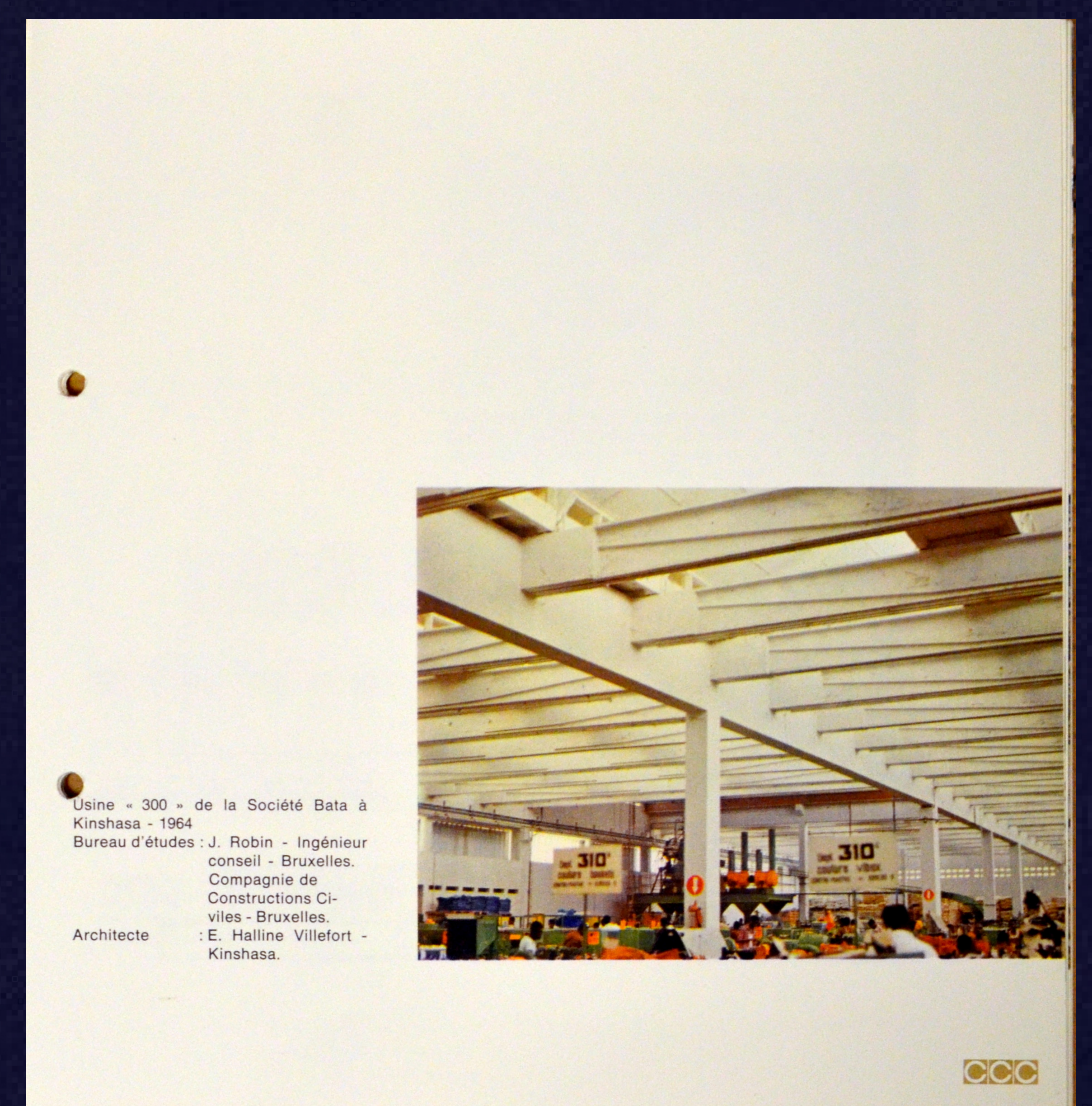
Clifton I own this brownstone.

Buggin' Out Who told you to buy a brownstone on my block, in my neighborhood, on my side of the street? Yo, what you wanna live in a Black neighborhood for, anyway? Man, motherfuck gentrification.

(Spike Lee, 1989)



1. We have to remark that Bata was already active in the Belgian Colony since 1942, albeit on a rather small scale and with the production of (more expensive) leather shoes (Clarence-Smith, 2013, pp. 197–198). The new factory brought up production drastically to 1.5 million pairs a year. (Mytelka, 1998, p. 381)
2. The Blaton-Magnel system, where only 2 cables had to be tensioned at the same time thus reducing the needed traction force was a serious simplification in the application of pre-stressed concrete, reducing the weight of the needed on-site equipment drastically to 5 tons (Van De Voorde, 2011).



3. Magnel mentioned the UCO-factory in his *Magnus Opum* 'Le Béton Précontrainte' as the "most important work executed as an application of prestressed concrete in a building" (Magnel, 1953, p.370)
4. Jacques Robin deemed these two projects as important for the emancipation of pre-stressed concrete as a fully-fledged building technique as its origin, the maritime centre in Le Havre by Freyssinet. (Robin, 1954, p.24)

They'll ask you where you got them.

Bata